

DWIGHT D.
EISENHOWER

Hero and Politician

Robert F. Burk

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TWAYNE PUBLISHERS • BOSTON
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Published by Twayne Publishers
A Division of G. K. Hall & Co.
70 Lincoln Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02111

Twayne's Twentieth-Century
American Biography Series No. 2

Photographs courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower
Library unless otherwise noted.

Designed and produced by Marne B. Sultz
Copyediting supervised by Lewis DeSimone
Typeset in 11/13 Goudy by Compset, Inc.

Printed on permanent/durable acid-free paper
and bound in the United States of America

First Printing

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Burk, Robert Fredrick, 1955—
Dwight D. Eisenhower, hero and politician.

(Twayne's twentieth-century American biography series ; no. 2)

Bibliography: p. 191

1. Eisenhower, Dwight D. (Dwight David), 1890–1969. 2. Presidents—United States—
Biography. 3. Generals—United States. I. Title. II. Title: Dwight D. Eisenhower, hero
and politician. III. Series.

E836.B87 1986 973.921'092'4 [B] 86-7693

ISBN 0-8057-7752-0

ISBN 0-8057-7773-3 (pbk.)

FOREWORD

Dwight David Eisenhower identified himself with George Washington. As Robert Burk shows in this incisive biography, Eisenhower strove to be for twentieth-century America what Washington had been almost two centuries before—"Father of his Country"—and in many ways he succeeded. Other generals besides Eisenhower and Washington have become president, but only these two have made equally great marks in military and civilian life. Both men led armies to triumph in the field and became overwhelmingly popular heads of state, but it was more than their successful leadership that gave them an enduring hold on people's imaginations and affections. Eisenhower, like Washington, became a paragon of patriotic devotion and a symbol of imposing dignity.

Yet how different this humbly born man from the nation's heartland was from the Virginia aristocrat on whom he modeled himself. Son of an unsuccessful small Kansas businessman, the young Eisenhower rose in the world initially through his athletic prowess. He chose a military

PREFACE

Dwight D. Eisenhower remains perhaps the greatest American hero of the twentieth century. His fame as a national soldier-statesman is exceeded only by that of his personal role model, George Washington. But Eisenhower was a distinctly twentieth-century version of the martial national hero. He grew up in the late nineteenth century when images of flamboyant individual valor still prevailed, although those images were bearing a steadily decreasing resemblance to reality. Born in the year labeled by Frederick Jackson Turner as the end of the frontier in American life, he would live until the year in which Americans traveled the new frontier of space to land on the moon. His life and career paralleled the rise of national and international bureaucratic institutions in business, labor, the military, and politics. By its end America had become a global colossus, but with its power to impose its will on world events proven limited in Southeast Asia and its future haunted by the risk of nuclear war.

As a major figure in both the military and politics during this ex-

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dwight D. Eisenhower has been a regular companion of mine for over a half-dozen years now—alternately a source of frustration, curiosity, and joy. Fortunately, in my attempts to wrestle with the man and the legend that is Ike, I have been aided by many fine individuals and institutions. Special thanks go to the staff of the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, the source of most of the manuscript material and photographs used for this study. Other photographic sources include the Republican National Committee and the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts. My appreciation also is extended to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the University of Cincinnati Library, and the Muskingum College Library for their help in unearthing secondary source materials.

One of the rewards of working on a manuscript is the opportunity to share ideas with and benefit from the criticism of able colleagues in the historical community. My thanks to Dr. Lorle Porter for reviewing the complete manuscript, and to Dr. David Sturtevant for helping me

avoid errors of fact and interpretation regarding Eisenhower's war record. Most of all, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor John M. Cooper, Jr., of the University of Wisconsin, who has on this occasion and before demonstrated his wisdom and consideration as an editor and friend. My appreciation also goes to managing editors Caroline Birdsall and John LaBine of Twayne Publishers for their faith in me and in the manuscript.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the debts I owe to my family for years of support and encouragement. To my parents, deep appreciation for showing me the value of a small-town Kansas boyhood. To Mrs. Helen Rutter, thanks for her understanding of my hermitlike isolation at the typewriter during a Philadelphia visit in the summer of 1984. To Tristan and Bruce, gratitude for constantly reminding me that work is not the only item of value in life. And to Patricia, my partner in work and at home and my sincerest critic, the hopes that I may someday repay, at least in part, my obligation for her sacrifices.

tended period of national transformation, Eisenhower, like others of his generation, would attempt to preserve the opportunities for, and the values of, individual initiative within the changed institutional setting of the twentieth century. In so doing he would become a symbol both of traditional individualist values and of the newly acquired global power of the United States. His career would be that of the adaptive hero, not seeking to dramatically alter the direction and goals of modern America, but instead attempting to preserve individual avenues of success within powerful national bureaucracies for himself and others.

In his own case, Eisenhower would prove strikingly successful, rising from relatively humble origins to become supreme Allied commander in Europe in World War II, army chief of staff, Columbia University president, supreme commander of NATO, and president of the United States. In order to achieve such success in the bureaucratic world of the twentieth century, to become an American hero, Eisenhower would learn, sometimes painfully, the necessity of being the politician. Personal advance depended no longer upon theatrical individual valor but upon the success of the institutional "team," combined with the public relations skills to translate it into the traditional imagery of individual heroism. Heroic lives were not forged so much as careers were managed. And perhaps more successfully than any other man of his generation, Eisenhower adapted himself to the managerial techniques of the modern state. He managed his own personality and temperament, restraining his more intemperate impulses. He managed men and resources effectively as a military commander and politician. Most skillfully of all, he managed his image and standing with the American public through nearly thirty years as a prominent national figure. In short, Dwight D. Eisenhower became the manager of the modern American national security state. This is his story.

career in order to acquire a free college education. Throughout his early years in the army he remained inwardly detached from its institutional traditions and taboos, and he later likened himself to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn in uniform. Yet, as Robert Burk demonstrates, this seemingly unassuming officer, who had long since acquired his folksy nickname, "Ike," was consummately ambitious, and he manipulated connections and assignments to bring off his phenomenal ascent through the ranks when World War II began. The stage was set for the emergence of the greatest single American reputation from that global conflict, the plainspoken, supremely competent, yet unwarriorlike supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe—Ike.

Eisenhower's military career alone would have earned him a major place in American history, although hardly an uncontroversial one. His brief experience as field commander raised many questions about his generalship, and as this biography also shows, his managerial and diplomatic methods had their sour as well as sweet sides. One of the advantages of this book's approach to Eisenhower is that it considers his military and political careers as part of a whole life. The young officer who became the general-diplomat laid down the patterns for the civilian statesman who became president from 1953 to 1961.

Eisenhower's presidency has remained curiously paradoxical. This enormously popular, venerated public figure, with his winning grin, came to be regarded by some critics as a bumbler and temporizer, whereas others have lauded him as a model of restraint and circumspection. Robert Burk penetrates this paradox with sympathy and sense. Ike's shortcomings and virtues receive thorough, evenhanded exposition, and they are placed in the context of the man's whole life and character. Given the significance of his careers and of the events through which he moved as a military and civilian leader, perhaps no American of the twentieth century needs to be understood more clearly than Eisenhower. Robert Burk's biography brings this understanding by bringing Ike to life again.

John Milton Cooper, Jr.

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AMBITION WITHOUT ARROGANCE

It is a typical American hero's story, full of images borrowed from a Norman Rockwell painting. It is the log cabin myth and the frontier thesis adapted to the environment of the Great Plains at the turn of the century. The hero's origins are ordinary but in their plainness contain the stuff of greatness. As a boy he is raised in a small-town setting free of artificial distinctions and barriers. His parents are humble, hard-working, God-fearing folk. Rural life provides ample opportunities for testing himself against the natural environment and for building his physical strength. His family and neighbors have imbued him with the proper values of self-reliance, thrift, hard work, and a cooperative spirit. Nurtured in this midwestern small-town setting, the young man is hesitant to leave it, but leave it he must. But his youthful memories and values never leave him. Instead they supply the foundations of character that, when tested in dramatic and dangerous new settings, lead to fame, glory, and heroism. The small-town boy becomes an American hero, and the Americanness is contained in the

notion that save for chance and circumstances, it could have happened to any of thousands in a land where "anyone can grow up to be president."

In such a fashion biographers have narrated the life of Dwight David Eisenhower, arguably America's greatest popular hero of the twentieth century. With allowances for personal modesty, this rural version of the Horatio Alger tale also is the way in which Eisenhower himself accounted for his rise to greatness. Boyhood in the midwestern hamlet of Abilene, Kansas, he wrote, had "provided both a healthy outdoor existence and a need to work. These same conditions were responsible for the existence of a society which, more nearly than any other I have encountered, eliminated prejudices based upon wealth, race, or creed, and maintained a standard of values that placed a premium upon integrity, decency, and consideration for others." For Eisenhower the roots of greatness were simple and straightforward: "Any youngster who has had the opportunity to spend his early youth in an enlightened rural area has been favored by fortune."¹

But the making of a hero, even an American one, is seldom such a neat and tidy matter. If small-town life was so idyllic, why would anyone ever leave it for the dangers and challenges of a larger world? Where did the driving ambition come from, the determination to make a name outside the seclusion of Abilene? Closer inspection of the details of Dwight D. Eisenhower's early life reveals significant variations from the romanticized, Rockwell-style portrait of small-town life. It was those differences, as well as the positive features of an Abilene boyhood and the factors of chance and circumstance, that propelled the young boy on his path to fame.

Dwight Eisenhower was born in 1890, the year that historian Frederick Jackson Turner cited as the end of the frontier era in America. If late nineteenth-century Abilene, Kansas, was any indication, Turner was right. Despite the prevailing dime-novel image of the town, by the time young Dwight arrived there at the age of two Abilene already had been transformed from a wild cattle town into a sedate midwestern community. Although dubbed the "Gem on the Plains" by town boosters anxious to drum up settlers and customers, Abilene found it difficult to live up to the slogan. Except for the occasional excitement stirred by such events as the Spanish-American War, news of the world beyond seldom upset the town's tranquility. Owing to their unusual positions as conduits to the outside world, the town telegrapher

and newspaper editor possessed a special status in the community. Neither a boomtown nor a cattle town, Abilene was settling into a sleepy existence with a small but reasonably stable population.

For a brief time Abilene had been more exciting. In the early 1870s, the town had been the terminus for longhorn cattle drives from Texas. The turbulent cow-town days had been followed by a short-lived population boom, but by the 1890s only a few illegal liquor establishments marred the community's new image of dull respectability. Instead of cleaning up after, or shooting down, carousing cowboys, Abilene's police force of one officer and a daytime marshal devoted their main attentions to rounding up truant schoolchildren. Residents in search of the "strenuous life" found it less often in real-life adventures and more frequently in social and club activities such as boxing, skating, and sledding. Late nineteenth-century Abilene was a town of modest-sized businesses—groceries, meat markets, drugstores, notions stores, and barbershops—each reliant in turn upon the prosperity of the surrounding agricultural economy. The town's churches were the heart of community values, social life, and cultural enrichment, supplemented occasionally by the traveling chautauqua. Not surprisingly, Abilene was cautious and conservative in its outlook, its religion, and its politics. Everyone was either formally or informally Christian in upbringing and of European origins, and a strong majority voted Republican.

On occasion modern improvements and social frictions tempered and challenged the town's bedrock conservatism. A new sewer system elicited admiration in 1903, a new high school was constructed in 1905, and paved streets followed in 1910. Cement sidewalks replaced wooden planks. Acquisition of an electrical generator and a telephone system further signaled the arrival of twentieth-century ways. Modernization also brought with it an expanding professional elite of doctors, lawyers, and bankers, and tensions simmered between the town's more affluent North Siders and the poorer South Side, located literally on the "wrong side of the tracks." But despite the changes and the conflicts, Abilene's basic character remained close-knit, protective, and provincial. Eisenhower's younger brother Milton recalled, "The isolation was political and economic, as well as just a prevailing state of mind. Self-sufficiency was the watchword; personal initiative and responsibility were prized; radicalism was unheard of."²

Yet in ways that few townspeople recognized or understood, Abilene

was part of, and affected by, the larger world outside. In spite of the homilies to self-sufficiency, the town's economic lifeline was the railroad, which carried in finished goods from the East and hauled out wheat. The unseen fluctuations of supply and demand on the international agricultural markets had a direct impact on the lives of farmers and town merchants alike. Even the most self-reliant of farmers could do little about the vagaries of weather, blight, or pests. Despite the town's political conservatism, the national government that seemed so remote and irrelevant had been, and remained, crucial to the community's very existence. Without the government's forced evacuation of the Indian from the Great Plains, Jacob Eisenhower and his band of Pennsylvania River Brethren would have found the area far less hospitable. Without government land grants to the Kansas-Pacific Railroad, the town would have had little or no economic base. Without agricultural policies promoting farm exports, Abilene might have gone the way of other boom-and-bust towns. Although Abilene's citizens liked to think of their community as a sheltered oasis on the plains, they were not without their prejudices, their fears, and most bothersome, their own forms of dependency.

If turn-of-the-century Abilene was not quite the exemplar of rugged midwestern self-sufficiency it made itself out to be, neither was Dwight Eisenhower's family quite so idyllic as the small-town myth predicted. It was easier for both Eisenhower and his later biographers to accept a simplified and idealized version of Dwight's boyhood years than to examine them in their full complexity. About his own father, David Eisenhower, it is fair to say that Dwight held ambiguous feelings at best. In later life he said very little about his father in public or in his writings, and such silence always was his most sincere form of criticism. Dwight ascribed few of the personal qualities he sought to develop in himself and others to his father. Nor was he the only Eisenhower sibling to criticize, albeit softly, David's actions. The portrait of David Eisenhower that surfaces from the personal accounts of his sons is that of a frustrated man, alternately subdued and embittered; a man more often feared than loved by his children. Dwight, for example, described his father as the "breadwinner, Supreme Court, and Lord High Executioner." Holding the commanding voice in a traditional German household, David insisted that the family's routine accommodate his daily schedule, and accordingly the boys were awakened at 5:00 A.M. to fix his breakfast before he left for work at a

six-day-a-week, 6:30 to 5:00 job. During the school term or not, one of the boys was expected to take him his lunch at work, and negligence sometimes resulted in whippings.³

David Eisenhower's violent outbursts and his stern demeanor toward his children might have been more excusable had he proven himself more successful to them as the family breadwinner. But he spent a large part of his adult life struggling to overcome early financial mistakes and failures. His parents, members of the River Brethren, or Plain People, had brought him to Kansas at the age of fourteen from Pennsylvania, the family home since the 1740s. Both parents claimed colorful backgrounds and were distinguished citizens of their devout, simple religious community. David's mother was the great-granddaughter of a Revolutionary War soldier and granddaughter of a War of 1812 captain, and his father, Jacob, had combined his talents as a successful farmer and minister. Not being one to refuse a shrewd business deal, David's father had sold the family property in Pennsylvania for \$175 an acre and had purchased a new homestead in the Abilene area for \$7.50 an acre. Within a year the new holdings of 160 acres had included a dairy herd, and Jacob Eisenhower had been able to offer each of his children a wedding dowry of a quarter-section of land and \$2,000 in cash.⁴

David had never liked the farming life, however, and he was determined to make a living some other way. Aspiring to an engineering career, he attended Lane University in LeCompton, Kansas, where he met and fell in love with his future wife, Ida Stover. Upon his return to the family homestead, he mortgaged away his dowry for \$2,000 in order to start up a general store partnership in the nearby town of Hope. Owing to irregular farm prices, a grasshopper invasion, over-extended credit, and what neighbors rumored to be an overindulgent life-style, David's business went bankrupt. The children were told later by Ida that the store's failure had been due primarily to the chicanery and poor management of their father's business partner. The story of the partner's dishonesty was at least partly true, but the choice of such an associate nevertheless reflected poorly on David's business judgment.⁵

It was because of David Eisenhower's financial difficulties that Dwight, the family's third child, was born in Denison, Texas, rather than in Abilene. The first child, Arthur, had been born in Hope in 1886, but after the store's collapse David had left the family and mi-

grated to Texas to work as an engine wiper for the Cotton Belt Railroad. For ten dollars a week he rented a small room in a frame house near the tracks in Denison. Ida had remained back in Kansas, pregnant with a second child whom she delivered in January 1889 and named Edgar. Following the birth, Ida joined her husband in Denison, where on 14 October 1890 she delivered a third son, named initially David Dwight Eisenhower. In an unusual twist, Ida insisted that her new son be called Dwight rather than David, so as to "avoid confusion" with his father. Later the official order of names was reversed to Dwight David Eisenhower.⁶

With three young children and a wife to support on a meager income, David found it necessary to swallow his pride and accept the assistance of relatives when they offered it in 1891. The River Brethren had opened a new cooperative creamery in Abilene, and its foreman was Chris Musser, David Eisenhower's brother-in-law. Musser also was the man who had overseen the foreclosure of David's farm in order to pay off some of the remaining debts from the general store failure. The creamery needed a mechanic, and in addition Jacob Eisenhower, now an elderly widower, wanted his son to rejoin the rest of the family in Kansas. Offered the job of mechanical engineer at the creamery for fifty dollars a month, David brought his growing family back to Abilene with only twenty-four dollars in his pocket.⁷

When visitors travel to Abilene today to visit Dwight Eisenhower's boyhood home; they see a modest but comfortable two-story structure that reinforces the idyllic images of his boyhood. But it was not until seven years after the return to Kansas that the family moved into the famous house on Fourth Street. From the ages of two to eight, Ike spent his childhood south of the railroad tracks in a structure not much larger than a shack. When the family did move to the larger house in 1898, again it owed more to the generosity of relatives than to any dramatic improvement in David Eisenhower's financial fortunes. David's brother Abraham, an amateur veterinarian, suddenly decided to become an itinerant preacher and offered to sell his residence on Fourth Street to his brother at a large discount. Even the Fourth Street house claimed a checkered heritage, for it was located on the general site of Abilene's former red-light district, the Devil's Addition. Although the new home was a definite improvement, its 818 square feet of space still had to accommodate a family that even-

tually numbered ten members, including seven children and the elderly Jacob Eisenhower.⁸

The Eisenhower family did not become financially secure for many years. As a result, the children were expected from an early age to contribute in whatever financial ways possible. Some of the boys ran errands for neighbors; others ran small vegetable stands with produce from the Eisenhower garden. David, in turn, took a correspondence course in engineering in his continuing hope of self-improvement. In his later years, he did obtain better-paying jobs, first as a gas plant manager and then as director of employee savings for a public utility. But for over twenty years his workplace remained the Belle Springs Creamery, and at the end of that time his salary was still only a hundred dollars a month. Constantly haunted by his early failures, David often withdrew into a brooding shell of pessimism and dread of debt. By the time Dwight himself reached adulthood, he understood better the tribulations of his father, and his sympathy for him grew accordingly. But even after the passage of many years, his father remained a distant figure to him.⁹

Despite his father's moodiness, the adult Dwight later recalled his adolescent years with affection. Never were the memories happier than when reminiscing about his mother. In his book, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*, he dedicated an entire chapter, entitled "Life with Mother," to Ida Stover Eisenhower's influence on him. In Ida, Dwight found the sources of character and values he prized in others and sought to develop in himself. Bearing a remarkable physical resemblance to him that merely underscored the closeness of their relationship, Ida was his and the other children's tutor, manager, and rock of stability. If David unknowingly proved the basis for Dwight's later dread of "paternalism," Ida was the model of leadership by example and cooperation, sprinkled with a firm sense of duty. With David gone from the home much of the time, Ida became both the chief organizer of family life and the most reliable presence in the children's lives.¹⁰

If her other qualities were not sufficient, Ida in many ways also cut a more inspirational figure than her husband. She had been born in Mt. Sidney, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley country, only to lose both of her parents by the time she reached age twelve. Along with ten other children, Ida had been raised by her maternal grandfather. When the children reached adulthood the entire family moved to